

Ramgul Valley, Nuristan



A Nuristani ailoq *at the head of the Wanasgul*

Abd al Nawab was very worried. The Nuristanis at the *ailoq* had told him that six well-known brigands armed with rifles had followed us from Puchal and made enquiries about us at the *ailoq*. They were from Ramgul and did not wish to rob us in Ramgul territory, but were planning to ambush us on the Kantiwar side of the pass, as they were on bad terms with that tribe. I was sceptical about this. Abd al Nawab had found out that there was an easy pass from the *ailoq* into the Kulam valley. The horsemen refused, however, to attempt any more passes and insisted on going back to Puchal. In the morning while we were discussing this, the owners of the *ailoq* said that they did not care where we went, but that we must leave at once, since our presence in the *ailoq* endangered them as the brigands might come back at any moment. We got back to Puchal that day and I paid off the horsemen and hired porters to take us across the mountains to Kulam. We had continuous trouble with porters from now on. The Nuristanis carry well, but realizing that we were dependent upon them, they demanded exorbitant wages. Several times our porters put down their loads on some bare mountain side and demanded a rise in pay. This led to continuous friction—which was a pity, for it left me eventually with a poor impression of them. The Nuristanis are a cheerful race, humorous, always ready to laugh, usually good tempered and extremely energetic, but they are unreliable, quick tempered, avaricious, treacherous and thievish. The mullahs and elders are fanatical, but the ordinary people are not, although all of them, even children, say their prayers with great regularity, and nowhere have I heard so many calls to prayer as I did in these Nuristani villages, the words a strange travesty of the original Arabic. They are extremely fond of singing and dancing—they play a viol, similar to that used in Chitral, which has either three or five strings, drums and reed pipes. Many of their songs are in Persian, some of them in Nuristani. All of them are tuneful with curious rippling melodies, often rather melancholy. The Nuristanis are nearly all bilingual, speaking Persian as well as their own language which has several dialects. Ramgul, Kulam and Kantiwar speak the same dialect, which differs from those spoken in the Pech valley and in the Bashgul valley. In fact, during this journey we met few people who could not speak Persian although practically none of them spoke Pushtu.

The porters carried magnificently and we reached Kulam in one day from Puchal. We climbed 6000 feet in a long steady grind. There was no water here until we were near the top of the mountain, an unusual circumstance in these parts. We stopped at an *ailoq* for a short rest on the mountain top, and ate curds and cheese. The mountains in this country are usually ridge-backed, and this was the only place I saw where there was a plateau. There were excellent grazing grounds here, used by the Kulam tribe. In most places the *ailoqs* were in the villages and the animals grazed on the steep mountain sides. The hostilities between the Ramgul and Kantiwar tribes had started over a dispute about a plateau grazing ground. The descent into the Kulam valley was very steep, and I was thankful that we were going down it instead of climbing up it. From the top of the pass, which I think was about 14,000 feet, there was a tremendous view to the east across precipices and gorges, thrown together in apparently hopeless confusion. We reached Kulam ten and a half hours after leaving Puchal. Kulam village, the largest in this valley, consisted of about twenty houses, situated on a spur at the junction of two valleys, and has magnificent views up and down these valleys. The surrounding mountains are forested with junipers, and edible as well as blue pines.

We spent two days at Kulam bargaining with new porters, and then travelled

down the valley to its junction with the Ramgul. It took us two days to get there, and for the last 5 miles we passed through an impressive sheer-sided gorge, along a track which would be impossible for animal transport. Below the junction of the two valleys the hillside was covered with small piles of stones, commemorating the Muslims of Abdur Rahman's army who had been killed in battle here by the Kafirs. We were now in Pashaie country; the Pashaie were originally Kafirs, but were forcibly converted by Abdur Rahman shortly before he conquered Ramgul and the rest of Kafiristan.

We visited the Government post at Junia, the first such post that I had met with on this journey. The river below the junction of the Ramgul and Kulam is known as the Alingar, and flows in a deep gorge through uninhabited country. We were advised not to follow the river, but to travel through the mountain to the west of it, and this we did. The mountain sides were thickly forested with holly oak, edible and blue pines, and junipers, and the ridges between the successive valleys were steep. We spent three nights in Pashaie villages. These people are quite different to the Nuristanis, being darker in colour, gentler in appearance and speaking a different language. They certainly appear to be a different race. They paint their eyelids, and sometimes even their eyebrows, which gave them an odd appearance; the young men and boys wear necklaces of beads, and put flowers in their caps and frequently carry small bunches of flowers in their hands. Many of them had flat metal ornaments in their ears, and most of the younger men were naked from the waist up, although a few of them wore goat skins across their shoulders. On one occasion we were put up in the local mosque, which would certainly not have happened in Nuristan. The women here were not the least shy. The houses, too, were quite different from any which I saw in Nuristan; they were better constructed, and the outer walls were given a plaster finish. The most distinctive feature of these houses was a fringe of cut grass, held down by stones, which was round the top of the parapet on the roofs, to run off the rain. In several places in the fields I noticed an ingenious arrangement for scaring bears. A small wheel was turned by the water in a stream and this revolved an upright stick to which two arms were fastened. These arms hit a board and made a loud and continuous noise. Bears are common and do much damage to the crops, especially the maize. Both the black and brown bears are to be found in Nuristan; there are also leopards. Ibex are to be found in many of the mountains and markhor in others, especially the more forested ones. We entered the Alingar valley above Shahi, where the people were Pathans. We got hold of new porters and travelled down the valley to Kalatussiraj in Laghman, where we arrived at mid-day on September 4. After lunch Abd al Nawab and I hired a tonga and arrived in Jalalabad at sunset.

During this journey I collected specimens of plants, which are now in the Botanical Department of the British Museum (Natural History). I also made a compass traverse and sketches of my route which have been worked out by Mr. Holland and the Society's draughtsmen, and produced the map which accompanies this paper, and is to be found at the end of the *Journal*. I am extremely grateful to the Afghan Government for giving me permission to make this most interesting expedition, and to Abd al Nawab for all the help he gave me during the journey.

A JOURNEY IN NURISTAN

WILFRED THESIGER

NURISTAN IS THE little-known part of the Hindu Kush which lies inside Afghanistan to the north of Jalalabad along the Chitral border. Sir George Scott Robertson was the first European to visit this country, when he spent a year in the Bashgul valley in 1889 while serving as British agent in Chitral. Nuristan was then independent, and was known as Kafiristan and its inhabitants as Kafirs. Kipling wrote his famous story "The man who would be king" about this country. However, in 1893 Sir Mortimer Durand reached agreement with Abdur Rahman, the Amir of Afghanistan, about the frontier between India and Afghanistan, and by this agreement Kafiristan fell almost entirely inside Afghanistan. Only a small area remained inside Chitral which is inhabited, even today, by pagans known as Black Kafirs. The other Kafirs were forcibly converted to Islam when Abdur Rahman overran their country in the winter of 1895–6, in a campaign which was skilfully conducted and only lasted four months. The main attack came from the valley of the Panjshir, but smaller forces also invaded the country from Badakhshan in the north, and Laghman in the south. After it had been conquered, Kafiristan was renamed Nuristan or "The Land of Light." Two important German expeditions travelled extensively in Nuristan in 1928 and 1935, and today the Nuristanis refer to all Europeans as Germans. A Danish expedition has also recently worked in certain parts of this country.

I had long been anxious to visit Nuristan, but permission to go there has always been difficult to obtain from the Afghan Government. I received this permission in the summer of 1955, but had by then decided to travel in the High Atlas in Morocco. I arranged, however, to go to Nuristan in the following autumn. John Newbould had travelled with me in Morocco, and hoped to accompany me to Nuristan to collect plants for the British Museum, but when I emerged from the marshes of southern 'Iraq, where I had spent the spring and early summer of 1956, I learnt that the Afghan Government had refused to give Newbould an entry visa. He was to have brought with him the collecting material, aneroids and other instruments. I knew that there were presses and blotting paper in Kabul, left over from my journey in the Hazarajat in 1954; there was, however, no time to get the other things sent out from England. It was particularly unfortunate that I did not have an aneroid with me on this journey.

I arrived in Kabul on July 18. My arrival coincided with the Eid festival, when all Government offices were shut, and in consequence it took me ten days to get the necessary travel permit to visit Nuristan. The Faculty of Literature in Kabul very kindly allowed one of their students, a young Pathan named Abd al Nawab, to go with me as my interpreter. Clifford Jupp of the British Embassy took me up the Panjshir valley as far as Kachu, where he had arranged to have a Land Rover available for Hugh Carless who, with Eric Newby, was trying to climb the 20,000-foot-high peak of Mir Samir on the Nuristan border.

At Kachu I engaged a Tajik boy to cook and two other Tajiks with two horses to carry our baggage. I was assured that it was possible for horses to cross the Hindu Kush into Nuristan and to travel down the Ramgul valley at least as far as

Puchal. This proved to be so, but I should have done far better to have taken Tajik porters from the Panjshir, and to have kept them with me all the time I was in Nuristan, instead of relying upon Nuristani porters when we sent the horses back. We travelled for five days up the Panjshir valley. The river was deep and the bridges were few and far between. The valley was narrow and the foothills, which ran down to it on either side, were covered with screes and bare earth. These foothills hid the high mountains which lay behind them, and only occasionally did we get a glimpse of the snow. A strong wind blew continuously up the valley and it was very hazy. There were small villages and scattered farmsteads in the valley bottom, and a ribbon of small terraced fields and orchards along the river, where wheat, barley, maize, and small patches of clover, vetch and beans, and a little tobacco were cultivated. Most of the fruit trees were mulberries, but there were also apples, apricots and walnuts, and there were clumps of poplars. The inhabitants of this valley were Tajiks. They wore long coloured cloaks of striped material over white shirts and trousers, and many of them wore waistcoats. Most of them wore turbans, white, black or blue in colour, but a few of them wore only skull caps. In the side valley of the Dara Hazara was a colony of Hazaras who are Sunnis, as are all the Tajiks. The other Hazaras in Afghanistan are Shias. The road to Badakhshan followed the valley and my men referred to it as the road to Turkistan. Most of the time we travelled in company with Tajiks, Kuchis, or occasional Nuristanis, who were going our way. In many of the villages were *shai-khanas* (tea shops), and we stopped at most of them, sometimes for a cup of tea, but more often so that my companions could inhale a few quick puffs from a hubble-bubble. At Shanaize I met Hugh Carless and Eric Newby, who had made a gallant but unsuccessful attempt to climb Mir Samir, and had then travelled down to Puchal in Nuristan and come back to Panjshir over the Arayu pass. We spent a very pleasant evening together, and I got some very useful information from them about the country ahead of me.

At Pase Akib I left the main valley, which comes down from the Anjuman pass, and followed instead the Chamar, which rises under Mir Samir. We were now too high for permanent villages. Here the valley was only inhabited during the summer, when both Tajiks and Kuchis take their herds up there for the grazing. We soon passed some Kuchi encampments belonging to the Chanzai tribe. These Kuchis are nomadic Pathans and they live in black tents, whereas the Tajiks, when camped on the mountains, build themselves stone shelters, often under overhanging rocks. The Tajiks call their summer encampments *ailoqs*. We followed the valley bottom which was covered with green turf, except where it was buried under landslides. The mountains on either side were precipitous and rocky with some snow along their tops. On the second night after entering the Chamar valley we camped in an *ailoq* under Mir Samir. It was very cold up there and it snowed a little during the night. Next morning we crossed the Chamar pass, which I judged to be about 16,500 feet high, and entered Nuristan. There was a magnificent view of Mir Samir (19,880 feet) from the pass. The summit of this mountain was covered in snow, but I was surprised to see how little of it there was on the surrounding mountains; near the pass there were only a few drifts. We dropped steeply down into the valley on the far side, which is also called the Chamar, and camped in an empty *ailoq*. The only fuel here was pin-cushion vegetation and cow dung, which was plentiful round the *ailoq*. The Tajiks who were with me were frightened of the Nuristanis and anticipated that we might have trouble when we met them. Towards evening half a dozen Nuristanis turned up in our camp; they had seen us

Mir Samir, in the Hindu Kush (19,880 feet





Nuristani in the Ramgul, near Puchal



Nuristani boy, Linar Valley

in the distance and had come down from their *ailoq* further up the valley to find out who we were. They were very friendly, invited us to come and spend the night with them, and, when we declined their invitation, they settled down to entertain us by dancing and singing. In appearance they were like handsome Europeans, light in colour, with brown hair and beards, while several of them had grey eyes. All of them wore dark Chitrali caps, short dark-coloured overcoats which ended in a distinctive fringe at the bottom, thick homespun trousers and puttees. They had red scarves knotted round their throats, and all of them were bare-footed. They remained with us until sunset and then left, after inviting us to visit them next day. They moved away quickly and easily across very broken ground. These people are born mountaineers and would make magnificent porters. I have seen them carrying loads of butter down to the villages from their *ailoqs*, and travelling at a jog-trot, although each of them must have been carrying a load of more than 50 lbs. They carry the butter in skins fastened on their backs inside a frame made from two V-shaped sticks. Sometimes they carry loads on their backs in large V-shaped baskets.

It was far warmer on this side of the mountain and nowhere in Nuristan did I see any glaciers, although there were the moraines of old glaciers in all the high valleys. Next day we visited the Nuristanis in their *ailoq* at the top of the valley, where they welcomed us and gave us curds and some milk. There were many marmots whistling among the rocks. We then followed the valley down to Puchal, where we arrived two days later. As we descended the valley we came first to scattered junipers and small thickets of birch along the streams. Lower down the mountains were lightly forested with junipers and along the river banks were large juniper trees, willows and tamarisks. We had to cross the river repeatedly, on bridges of juniper trunks split in half and more than 20 feet in length. The Chamar enters the Bugulchi, or Dara Rast, above Puchal, and the river is there generally known as the Puchal. Names are confusing in Nuristan since they have abandoned some of the old Kafir names. The whole of this valley is the Ramgul, and the tribes who live here were also called the Ramgul, but today many of the younger men do not know this name and call themselves Nuristanis. The valley to the east is the Kulam, and both the valley and the tribe who live there are still called by this name. Still further to the east they also use the old names, Kti or Kantiwar, Presun and Waigal.

The country round Puchal was magnificent—the valley was very narrow and the mountains rose above it, jagged and very sheer, their lower slopes thickly wooded with holly oak. Puchal, the chief village in the Ramgul valley, is divided into two parts and numbers in all about forty houses. It is the religious centre for the district, and the mullahs were fanatical and unpleasant, making no secret of their hostility to me as a Christian. When I returned here for the third time, after an unsuccessful attempt to get into the Kulam from the Wanasgul, a mullah rushed down the hill side towards us and poured out curses on me for defiling this stronghold of Islam with my presence. It was the fanaticism of the newly converted; his father must have been an infidel for the country had only been converted to Islam sixty years ago. The houses, built of mud and stones, were flat roofed and many of them were in two stories. In the villages they were crowded together one on top of the other up the hill sides, but many were situated by themselves in the fields and orchards. The richer houses were comfortable and some of them were warmed by flues built under the floors. There were no furnishings in any of the houses other than carpets, pillows and mattresses, and a few rickety rope beds. Most of these

houses were remarkably free from bugs. When I had been in the Kafir villages in Chitral the bugs had been appalling.

The almost invariable diet of these Nuristanis was bread, made from wheat, barley or maize, with curds or cheese. They have some chickens and eat eggs, and they also eat fish. Robertson said in his book 'The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush,' that the tribes in the Bashgul would not under any circumstances eat fish. If in the past they had this prejudice in the Ramgul valley they have now abandoned it. At the beginning of the winter when they are killing off surplus stock they eat a certain amount of meat, but while I was there I was never given any meat, other than chickens, in their houses. It is always difficult to buy flour and this makes travelling with porters difficult. It is even more difficult to buy butter, although they produce good quantities in their summer camps. They invariably say that the butter does not belong only to them but is the joint produce of several families. In the past the Kafirs were famous for the wine which they made, but as a result of their conversion to Islam they no longer make any, at least not in the districts in which I travelled. Tea is a luxury in their houses, and sugar is almost unprocurable. In the autumn fruit, of poor quality, is abundant—apples, pears, apricots, peaches, pomegranates, grapes and walnuts. Much of this fruit, especially the mulberries, falls to the ground and rots, and walking through the orchards I was often struck by the strong smell of fermenting fruit which they are lazy about collecting, although they do dry a certain amount on their roofs. They have no difficulty about firewood in their villages as all the mountainsides are heavily wooded, especially with holly oak. I saw no pines in the Ramgul valley but there were forests of edible and blue pines in the Kulam valley and also in the Pashaie country to the south. The people use the wood of resinous trees as torches for lighting their houses after dark.

The Nuristanis grow wheat, barley, maize and sorghum, as well as broad and runner beans, in small terraced fields, and they cultivate some vegetables, such as tomatoes and marrows, round their houses. All their crops are watered by small irrigation channels, which convey the water from the river along the hill sides, but I saw no rain cultivation here, such as I had seen in the Hazarajat. Most of the work in the fields appears to be done by the women, who certainly do most of the harvesting and cutting of the hay. These tribes do not grow nearly enough grain for their own requirements but they do make large quantities of butter in their summer camps, which they keep in the ice-cold streams until there is enough to take down to the villages—there it is boiled and then carried down to Laghman, or across the Hindu Kush to Panjshir for sale. They bring back the grain which they require from these places, especially from Laghman, and there are watermills for grinding corn in most of the villages.

They weave a thick, heavy cloth, usually of a dark colour; for their clothes, and they also make rugs. There are looms outside many of the houses. They do not make felt as they do in the Hazarajat. Even in 1889 Robertson noted that the Kafirs had no particular dress of their own, but wore indiscriminately the clothes of neighbouring tribes, and this is especially true today. Some of them dress like Tajiks, others like Pathans. They wear Chitrali caps, turbans or skull caps as the fancy takes them. Their only indigenous dress seems to be a short overcoat with a fringe round the bottom, and the habit of wearing gay-coloured scarves knotted round their throats is also peculiar to them. They are often bare-footed, at any rate in the summer and autumn, but some of them wear soft leather boots similar to those worn in Chitral. Many of them sew charms and coins onto their jackets.

The young men and boys paint round their eyes with a red juice and also use antimony on their eyelids, which gives them a strange and rather dissipated appearance. The women do not veil, but are extremely shy, turning away or hiding themselves whenever I drew near. They are fond of red as a colour, especially for their undergarments. The boys often carry double-stringed bows for shooting stones and spend much time shooting at birds, although they seldom hit any; I saw similar bows in Chitral. Many of the household utensils, such as dishes and milk pails, are made of wood often decorated with crude incised patterns; their cooking pots are of iron but they seldom own a kettle.

From Puchal we travelled down the valley and after 6 miles we passed Sang-i-Navishta, where on a face of rock above the peak is an inscription by Abdur Rahman celebrating his conquest of Kafiristan, and another inscription, which is attributed by the locals to Timurleng who passed through this country in 1398, but the light was bad and the inscription was high up and I could make nothing of it. We continued down the valley to where the Linar enters it from the north. Three miles below this point the river enters the Mandul lake, quite a small piece of water, perhaps half a mile across at its widest. It is said to be full of fish which the Nuristanis catch with nets. They told me they sometimes catch fish weighing up to 100 lbs. or even more. There were half a dozen cormorants on this lake, and otter tracks in the sand at the water's edge. Several boys were bathing here and like all Nuristanis they were extremely good swimmers. Above the lake the river flows slowly through wide meadows, where women were busy cutting the hay as we passed by. Below the lake the river enters a rocky gorge, and the track beyond this point is said to be impassable for animal transport. The hills above the lake were heavily wooded with holly oak. We travelled up the Linar valley and eventually camped at the foot of the Arayu pass, but we were delayed for three days before we got there. Our horsemen, despite constant warnings, plunged their horses into deep water crossing the river, instead of unloading them and carrying our kit over a plank bridge. The loads were soaked and in consequence of the row which ensued I decided to get pack ponies from the Nuristanis. These ponies were on the high pastures and, when they were eventually produced, were unshod, which caused still further delays, until at last a blacksmith was produced to shoe them. Two days earlier one of the Tajik horsemen had trouble with a Nuristani who claimed that our horseman owed him some money. The argument had gone on for some time when suddenly in a narrow length of path the Nuristani struck the Tajik to the ground, where he lay weeping with his nose streaming with blood. I threw the Nuristani off him as he was preparing to strike him again. Abd al Nawab handled the situation with skill and made the Tajik pay up the money which he undoubtedly owed.

I climbed to the top of the Arayu pass where I got another view of Mir Samir, towering over the surrounding mountains. We then returned to Puchal. I now decided to continue up the valley to the Wanasgul, and to cross from there into the Kantiwar and then back into the Kulam valley. We left Puchal on August 18. In the evening as we were going along a narrow path a few feet above the river one of our horse's loads caught on a projecting rock; the horse struggled to pass and was forced over backwards into the river, where horse and load were completely submerged. The horse found its feet and started out into the stream. Its load had slipped under its belly. It would undoubtedly have been drowned in the rapids, which were only a short distance downstream, if a boy who was with us had not immediately jumped into the river and turned it back to the bank. Everything I

had with me was soaked. My large collection of plants was a sodden mass of blotting paper; the two boxes containing my films, spare lenses, notebooks, passport, money and clothes were filled with water. There was nowhere to camp except on the narrow path and here we struggled to dry the plant collection before it grew dark. Luckily there was only a slight breeze instead of the strong wind which normally blew at this hour, but our task was not made easier by strings of women who came down the path carrying loads of wood. We got the last plants dry just as it got dark.

Next day we travelled up the Wanasgul. We passed through woods of oak, willow and various kinds of thorn trees, and then through thickets of birch and scattered junipers. The valley bottom was damp and very green. We were accompanied by four Goujars, on their way back to Kantiwar, who were carrying very heavy loads of flour. They had come down to Puchal a few days before to get their corn ground at the mill. These Goujars, who looked very Indian beside the Nuristanis, have a bad reputation and are universally unpopular in this country. They spend the summer in the mountains and winter in the valleys near Laghman. There are no Kuchis in Nuristan, which is one of the few mountain areas in Afghanistan where they do not penetrate. We camped that night in an *ailoq* high up in the valley, where the scenery was magnificent, the mountains towering above us, streaked with snow. There were six men and a small boy at this *ailoq*. Like all these *ailoqs* it consisted of a few small, crudely built, stone cabins, roofed with bushes and earth supported on poles, and some stone shelters, open to the sky. We bought a sheep for dinner. These Nuristanis do not own large flocks of sheep or goats nor many cows, but nearly all families own a few animals. Several families usually join up to form an *ailoq*, moving their animals up to the summer pastures in May and back again to the village in September. During the winter they feed them on hay, using stalks and the dried leaves of various plants, such as rhubarb and hog weed, which they collect during the autumn and stock either on the roofs of their houses or in the forks of trees.

Next day we climbed the pass. It was a steep climb, the going was appalling for horses and there was no visible track. Tumbled boulders were piled on a great bed of plutonic rock. It had been smoothed and scratched by ice, and was split and riven into segments, which were often very regular. The rock, a pale grey in colour, was covered with a dark, almost black, patina so that it looked like basalt. This was typical of the rock throughout those parts of Nuristan which I visited, although in some places there were considerable igneous intrusions. I climbed to the top of the pass into Kantiwar but it was quite impossible to get horses through this chaos of tumbled rocks. Eventually as it grew dark we got them across onto the mountainside above the Nau Swan, which runs parallel with the Wanasgul, and camped there. There was no firewood and no water, and we had had nothing to eat all day. It was bitterly cold. We spent the next morning trying to find a way down into the valley bottom, but it was hopeless. Eventually I sent the horses back unloaded with Abd al Nawab and the two horsemen to the *ailoq* in the Wanasgul, while I stayed with our Tajik servant and the baggage on the mountainside. I think we were camped at about 15,000 feet. We had a small Meade tent and enough solid fuel for our requirements. From our camp we looked out across range upon range of mountains, where jagged serrated peaks, precipices and hard rock faces looked grim and desolate. Throughout the night small avalanches crashed down off the ice walls opposite us. Next morning the two horsemen arrived and we carried our baggage down to the *ailoq*.



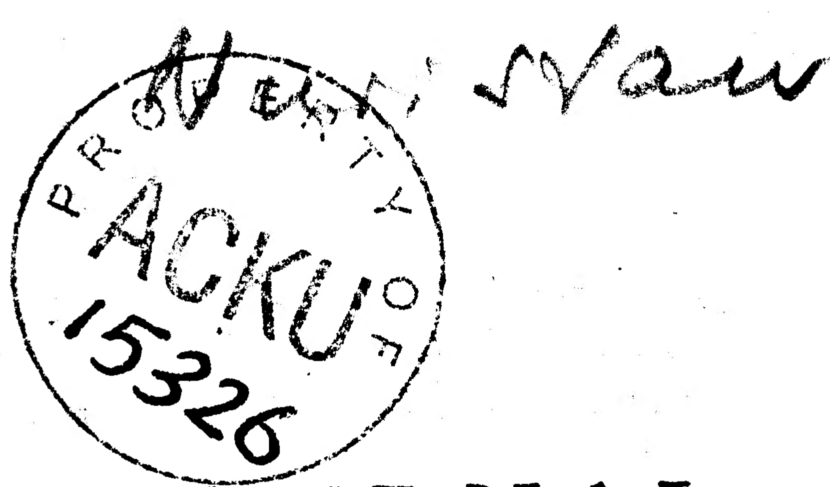
Puchal: capital of Nuristan





Pashaie homes, near Junia

Thesiger: Nuristan



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